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SUBJECT: JOURNALISTS ON SOCIAL CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR POLITICAL REFORMS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. A May 18 Consulate-sponsored roundtable between visiting Western and Asian journalists participating in the East-West Center-organized Jefferson Fellowship Program, Chinese journalists, and Shanghai-based U.S. journalists sparked lively debate on China's rich-poor gap, the one-child policy, the generation gap, democracy, and press freedom. While one Chinese journalist took the party line and said that two-party democracy was not needed in China, other journalists argued for faster political reforms. Chinese journalists agreed that Chinese leaders needed to address the growing rich-poor gap, which one journalist referred to as "a time bomb." Shanghai-based U.S. journalists noted the difficulties they faced in meeting with anyone connected with the government and in covering political and social issues. End Summary.

Rich-Poor Gap Time Bomb

¶2. (SBU) The Chinese journalists participating in the roundtable discussion agreed that the growing rich-poor gap was one of China's biggest challenges. One journalist who worked for a government-owned newspaper in Shanghai said that although the gap was widening, the poorest sector of society was better off now than it was 20 years ago. He added that the Hu Jintao government was making great efforts to improve the situation of the poor. For example, the central government had abolished taxes for farmers and was trying to improve healthcare for rural peasants. He noted that there was a growing problem of "left-behind" children who remained in the countryside while their parents traveled to the city to find work. He estimated that there were 20 million such "left-behind" children in China.

He said that the government was trying to alleviate this situation by building daycare centers in big cities to allow parents to bring their children with them and that there were

also new policies in some big cities (such as Shanghai) that required local public schools to accept migrant children. He noted, however, that despite government efforts at integration, migrant workers and the rural poor were still the underclass of Chinese society.

¶ 13. (SBU) Another Shanghai journalist described the Chinese healthcare system as having effectively "crashed" with the advent of economic reforms. The government was trying to rebuild the rural healthcare system, he said, but this was occurring at a very slow pace. In the city, residents had healthcare, but there were limits built into even that system. According to him, the rich-poor gap was a "time bomb" because the countryside was not benefiting as much from China's economic development as the urban areas and many in the countryside were being forgotten and left-behind. In Shanghai, there were three to four million migrant workers. If Shanghai's construction boom stopped, one million of those workers would be out of work, which could lead to chaos.

One-Child Policy Burden

¶ 14. (SBU) The young Chinese journalists in the group acknowledged that the one-child policy had placed a great burden on the younger generation. One said that she was her parents "one bet." She was the only person her parents could turn to if they got sick. In the past, children could share the burden of taking care of their parents, but now the parents only had one child to take care of them. One journalist said that she had to save money not only to provide her child with an education, but also to hire people to take care of her parents when they became older.

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Generation Gap

¶ 15. (SBU) According to one young Chinese journalist present, there was a generation gap between younger (20-somethings) and older (40-somethings) adults in China. She said there did not appear to be any basic foundation on which people of different generations could talk. Young people complained on Internet websites and in chatrooms about the generation of people born in the 1960's. They called this generation the "lost generation" and complained that it had made many mistakes that young people now had to live with. They said that Chinese websites were filled with complaints and anxieties about the future. The journalist added that such postings were constantly being deleted by the censors, but that they always came back again and again.

Democracy Now or Later

¶ 16. (SBU) The Chinese journalists heatedly debated the need for democracy in China. A young journalist from Beijing, herself a Jefferson Fellow, said that she personally believed that there would be no political structural changes in China in the next ten years. The situation in China was very different from the United States, she said, and a two-party political system was not suitable for China. Citing the Tang and Han dynasties, she said China traditionally had a one-party system and what was needed was for the Party to be more transparent and democratic. A young journalist from Shanghai warned that there were costs to establishing democracy in China. In a country with so many poor people, it was unclear who in China would be willing to pay the costs needed to establish a democracy.

¶ 17. (SBU) Another young journalist from Shanghai disagreed vehemently and said that one could not say that Chinese people did not like democracy or that democracy was against Chinese tradition. She defined democracy to mean "a system in which people could participate in the decision-making process." She added that democracy was not a unique Western concept and said

it was important for China to implement reforms immediately, albeit gradually. According to her, China's current one-party system was not working. In her view, there were no saints or philosopher kings in the world; everyone was human and governments needed checks and balances. She said there was already a great deal of tension among peasants in China and, unless something was done to address their needs, there would be violence.

¶ 18. (SBU) A 40-something Shanghai journalist shared a similar view. He said while democracy was not efficient, it was at least fair. He said there was no need to organize a revolution, but reforms needed to be implemented gradually to address some of China's social problems. Another 40-something Shanghai journalist said that he was very optimistic that there would be democratic reforms in China in the future. He said the Chinese government was pushing many democratic measures and he felt that President Hu Jintao wanted democracy. He added that there had already been progress in this area, noting that when he had attended a Consulate discussion with the Jefferson Fellows in 2005, journalists were not willing to debate such topics. The lively and open debate at this session was a testament to the increased openness in China.

Press Freedom Limited

¶ 19. (SBU) Shanghai-based U.S. journalists briefed participants on the media environment in Shanghai. One said that while it was relatively easy for Western journalists to meet with business people and Chinese counterparts in the press in

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Shanghai, it was very difficult to meet with anyone connected with the government, including in state-owned enterprises. In these cases, journalists could not go directly to the government offices or companies for interviews, but had to instead go through the Foreign Affairs Office (FAO), which often resulted in requests for interviews being declined. She added that a journalist must be very inventive in Shanghai to get access to information. Another U.S. journalist agreed and said that it was much easier to cover economic issues in Shanghai than political or social issues. He said that he had heard of cases in which emails were intercepted or sources were told not to talk to journalists. The U.S. journalists also made mention of the relatively new regulations that allowed foreign journalists to travel freely in China to cover Olympics-related news.

Comment

¶ 10. (SBU) This discussion among journalists was interesting not only for its candor, but for the differences in views expressed on China's future between 20-somethings and 40-somethings. The younger journalists admitted that their only-child generation tended to be self-centered and to think first about the impact of any change on their own lives. Their 40-year-old counterparts, in contrast, were from a more idealistic generation that still held out hope for the traditional Chinese, step-by-step approach to gradual change. Similarly on the rich-poor gap, the two groups' views split along generational lines with the younger group foreseeing imminent unrest and the older group confident that the government was taking appropriate measures to avert a crisis. In all, the discussion provided the visiting Jefferson Fellows with insights into the lives of average Chinese of two very different generations and proved an useful forum for eliciting a variety of opinions on China's current social challenges and prospects for political reforms

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